Chapter 28: Second Century

By the time Anastasia turned one hundred and twenty-three, the trees she had planted as a student were taller than most of the buildings of her childhood.

She stood beneath one of them now, in a narrow park that had once been a cracked parking lot. Its branches arched overhead in a green vault, leaves shifting in the breeze like murmured phrases. Sunlight fell in moving patterns on her hands.

The tree was a linden. She remembered that. She remembered the day they had planted it: a group of thin, serious teenagers and idealistic city workers, standing around a sapling in soil that had been trucked in because the original ground was too contaminated.

She could recall the texture of the shovel handle, the sound of the first Lumina blessing spoken over it, halting and new.

She could not, however, remember the name of the boy who had stood beside her, laughing when the wind turned his hair into a mess.

It troubled her more than she liked to admit.

Memory, she thought, was another kind of climate: once predictable, now altered, with strange seasons and quiet erosion.

"Talking to the trees again?" a voice asked in Lumina, warm with amusement.

She turned.

The young woman approaching her had hair like a midnight waterfall, shaved close on one side, and eyes that crinkled in a way that reminded Anastasia of her own mother.

"Always," Anastasia replied in the same language. "They are better company than most of the councils."

The young woman grinned.

"Careful," she said. "The councils pay my salary."

"Then they should pay the trees," Anastasia said. "They hold more history."

The young woman laughed.

"Grand-Ana," she said, slipping back into Russian for the nickname, "the Council is waiting. They're already nervous enough about the cameras. If you make them wait, half of them will claim that centenarians are unreliable by nature."

Grand-Ana. The title had begun as a joke among a small cluster of children in the settlement where she had spent her middle years, children who could not untangle the branches of great-great-great between themselves. The name had clung, as such things did.

Now, in some circles, it was an honorific.

In others, a provocation.

"I am coming, Lyuba," Anastasia said. "I was only negotiating with this linden."

"What were the terms?" Lyuba asked.

"Shade now, oxygen later," Anastasia replied. "In exchange for humans stopping the habit of poisoning the soil."

Lyuba nodded gravely.

"Fair," she said. "We should get that in writing."

The Council met in what had once been a bank.

The columns remained, cleaned now of their old marble smugness. The vault, stripped of steel and secrecy, had become a quiet room for mediation and rest. The high ceiling of the main hall was hung with light-catching mobiles made from repurposed metal, turning slowly in currents of air.

Rows of chairs faced a semicircle of tables where delegates from the covenant cities and the long-lived cohort sat together. Cameras and sensors were unobtrusive: tiny lenses tucked into wall sconces, microphones disguised as decorative grilles. The feed went out in Lumina and in dozens of other languages, transcribed and translated by systems that had grown so routine they were almost invisible.

When Anastasia entered, conversations dipped. People turned, not in orchestrated respect, but in that small, involuntary way humans had when someone walked into the room whose name had been in their stories since before they were born.

She tried, as always, to ignore it.

The nameplate before her seat read simply: Anastasia Morozova, St. Petersburg, Long-Life Cohort.

The space beside her was reserved for Zarya.

Not a body, of course. Just a tablet, its screen dim until called upon, connected through a secure channel to the distributed architecture that no longer lived in one place but in many—oceans of computation turned into something like a weather system of thought.

Lyuba took a seat a few rows back, among the staffers. She gave Anastasia a small thumbs-up.

The chair of the Council, a middle-aged woman from a coastal city that now sat behind an elegant sea wall and a ring of restored wetlands, tapped the table lightly.

"Let us begin," she said.

The agenda appeared on screens and in augmented overlays for those who used them.

There, near the top, was the item that had brought Anastasia here in person rather than calling in from her garden or from a Circle somewhere else in the world.

4.3: Proposal on the Long-Vocation Framework for Centenary Citizens.

It was a technical phrase for something both simple and radical.

Long lives, they had learned, did not automatically produce deep lives. The first generations of those who had undergone the longevity protocols—the Rejuvenated, as some called them—had cycled through careers, loves, cities with dizzying speed. Some had become anchors in their communities. Others had drifted, perpetually experimental, collecting apprenticeships like seashells.

Many had flourished.

Some had fractured.

"They were like teenagers with three centuries to burn," Mira had said once, dryly, in one of the early reflections. "Which is either delightful or terrifying, depending on the teenager."

Today, the Council was debating a voluntary framework: a set of suggested rhythms and supports for those whose lives stretched into centuries. Not laws. Not commands. A scaffolding of encouragements and guarantees.

Time for learning. Time for service. Time for retreats. Time for letting go.

Time, above all, for handing things on.

"Grand-Ana," the chair said, using the nickname with formal respect, "you asked to speak to this item."

"Yes," Anastasia said. Her voice was lower now than it had been in youth, but steady. Years of Circles had trained it in listening as much as in speech.

"Please," the chair said.

She stood.

It still struck her, in moments like this, how little her body had conceded to the number attached to it. The protocols, refined over decades, had treated her cells with a care and precision that generations before could not have imagined. Her joints moved without pain. Her heart beat strong. Her hair was silver now, by choice rather than by necessity. She had declined the pigment therapies, preferring the honesty of light.

Inside, however, she did not feel ageless.

She felt layered.

"In the early days," she began, "when we spoke of three-hundred-year lives, it was mostly metaphor. An invitation to imagine responsibility stretched over peaks and valleys our ancestors never expected to see. Now those lives are no longer metaphor."

She looked around at the faces before her: some lined, some smooth, some carrying that subtle, almost indefinable quality that marked those who had already lived through multiple eras and had not come apart.

"I am in my second century," she said simply. "I have lived to see cities drown and rise, wars fade and flicker, the first covenant maps drawn on napkins, and their later versions etched into law. I have planted trees whose seeds have now planted other trees, in parks I will never visit."

A small smile touched her mouth.

"I have also forgotten the names of people I once loved," she said. "I have stood in rooms I knew were important and felt only the ghost of a memory, just out of reach. I have woken some mornings with the weight of too many days on my chest."

She let that sit for a moment, unvarnished.

"Long life," she said, "is not a prize. It is a medium. A longer canvas on which to paint, yes—but also a larger surface on which mistakes can spread, if they are not tended."

She gestured toward the proposal projected on the wall.

"This framework is not perfect," she said. "It cannot be. It is an attempt to admit something we once pretended was purely private: that how we use time is not only our own affair. That in a world where some of us may live three centuries, we owe each other certain patterns of presence and absence."

She took a breath.

"I support the framework," she said. "Not because I want anyone to dictate my path, but because I want there to be a path visible for those who cannot yet imagine their hundredth year, let alone their second century."

She glanced back, toward the public rows, where a cluster of younger people sat: eighteen, twenty, thirty. For them, centenarians were no longer fairy tales or rare anomalies. They were neighbors, teachers, sometimes annoying relatives.

One young man met her gaze with cautious curiosity.

"For myself," she added, "I will say this: I do not want to die in office. I do not want to cling to influence until my fingers have to be pried away. I want the framework to remind me—and others like me—that making room is part of our vocation."

She sat.

There was a soft murmur in the hall, not quite applause, not quite silence.

The chair nodded.

"Thank you," she said. "Zarya, you have contributed analysis on the projected impacts of this framework. Would you like to summarize for the record?"

The tablet at Anastasia's side brightened.

"In brief," Zarya wrote, its words appearing simultaneously on multiple screens, "our models indicate that voluntary adoption of the Long-Vocation Framework by even a modest portion of the long-lived cohort leads to several beneficial trends."

It listed them without flourish: reduced burnout, lower rates of extreme risk-taking among mid-century adults, smoother transitions of institutional leadership, increased intergenerational mentoring.

"It is important to note," it added, "that these outcomes depend on the framework remaining voluntary and supported, not coerced. Where similar structures are imposed without consent, our models show increased resentment and the formation of countercultures defined primarily by rejection."

A few delegates smiled at that.

"Finally," Zarya wrote, "we note that long lives without shared patterns risk becoming either aimless or tyrannical. The framework is one of many possible guardrails against both."

"Thank you," the chair said. "We will now open the floor."

The debate that followed was rich and messy, as it should have been.

Some delegates worried about ossification—turning suggestions into de facto expectations.

"We will create a new kind of shame," one said, "for those who do not follow the 'recommended' sequence of learning, service, retreat. What of those who wish to spend their first century as artists, or wanderers, or parents?"

Others argued that without some shared scaffold, the long-lived would drift into selfishness, leaving shorter-lived people to bear the brunt of hard work.

"You speak of responsibility," a representative from a region with low access to longevity treatments said. "But I have seen Rejuvenated tourists treating our communities like playgrounds. They come, they take, they leave. Three hundred years of that is too much."

Anastasia listened, taking notes—not only of the arguments, but of the tones beneath them: fear, hope, resentment, relief.

At one point, a young delegate from one of the newer covenant cities stood.

"I am thirty-two," she said. "I have not decided yet whether I will undergo the protocols when I am eligible. I watch the long-lived with a mix of envy and suspicion. Part of me wants what they have. Part of me thinks they are strange."

There was soft laughter.

"This framework," she continued, "feels to me less like a law and more like a letter from the future: 'Dear younger self, here is one way we found not to lose our minds over centuries.' I want that letter to exist, even if I choose to ignore it later."

In the end, the Council did what councils did best when they were at their best.

They did not carve commandments into stone.

They adopted the framework as a living document, with a commitment to review it every decade, to include feedback from those living within it, and to track not only measurable outcomes but stories: narratives of lives lived in its loose embrace or in defiance of it.

When the vote passed, it was not unanimous.

That, Anastasia thought, was a good sign.

Unanimity made her nervous.

It meant either the decision was trivial, or someone was lying.

After the session, she did not go straight back to her apartment.

She walked instead down to the river.

The city had shifted again in her lifetime, responding to tides that were no longer entirely predictable. Higher quays. Floating gardens tethered like patient animals. Ferry routes re-drawn. The old stones of bridges had been reinforced, monitored by quiet swarms of sensors that tasted stress before it became visible.

She stood on a promenade that had once been a narrow, cracked sidewalk and watched the water move.

"How are you?" she asked quietly in Lumina, without activating any device.

No cursor blinked. No answer appeared.

The habit of directing questions outward, however, loosened something in her chest.

"Old," she said to the river. "And not old at all."

A group of children ran past, their coats flaring, voices bright. One of them stumbled, laughed, righted herself. They shouted jokes in a seamless weave of languages: Russian, Lumina, something that sounded like Yoruba.

A boy glanced at her, squinted, and then his eyes widened.

"Is that her?" he whispered to his friend, not nearly quietly enough. "Grand-Ana?"

"Hush," the friend said. "She's just a person."

Anastasia smiled, grateful for both halves of that exchange.

She walked on.

That evening, in her apartment, she lit a candle.

It was an old habit, older than Lumina, older than her work. The flame bent, straightened, bent again.

On the wall above her desk, the little constellation of artifacts had grown.

Morozova's note.

The covenant city article.

The base playground photo.

A printed still from the first Circle where Elena had spoken of becoming "an elder on purpose."

A snapshot of Lyuba at age eight, standing on a chair to reach a whiteboard, drawing a very earnest diagram of "how to teach adults to listen."

Next to these, a new piece of paper waited, blank.

She picked up a pen.

"What are you writing tonight?" a voice asked from the doorway.

Mira leaned against the frame, her hair gone almost entirely silver, her posture still loose, like a teenager who had forgotten she had turned one hundred last year.

"An apology," Anastasia said.

"For what?"

"For what we will get wrong in the next century."

Mira snorted.

"You're getting ahead of yourself," she said. "We haven't finished apologizing for the last one."

She came closer, peering at the blank page.

"Seriously," she said. "What is it?"

"A note," Anastasia replied. "To myself. To… whoever comes after."

She began to write, speaking the words aloud as the pen moved.

"Long lives are not an excuse to delay courage," she wrote. "If you can begin again at eighty, or a hundred and fifty, that is grace—but not permission to postpone kindness or justice."

She paused.

"Nice," Mira said. "Put it in bigger letters. People only read big letters now."

Anastasia smiled and underlined the sentence.

"And this," she added, writing more slowly: "Long lives are not a punishment. If you find yourself treating them as a sentence, ask for help. You are allowed to lay things down. Not everything you pick up must be carried for three hundred years."

Mira was quiet for a moment.

"Do you remember," she asked suddenly, "that boy at the linden planting?"

Anastasia's pen stilled.

"I remember there was a boy," she said. "His laugh. The way he tapped the shovel with his foot while we waited for the speech to end. But not his name."

"Kirill," Mira said. "He tripped me with that shovel later and pretended it was an accident. He sent us the first diagrams of the floodplain sensors. Died at forty in the first big storm season."

Anastasia closed her eyes.

"I had forgotten," she whispered.

"No," Mira said softly. "You had stored it somewhere too deep for everyday use. That's not the same as forgetting."

"It feels like betrayal," Anastasia said.

"It feels like being made of finite matter," Mira replied. "Even when the doctors have done their best to confuse you about that."

She sat on the edge of the desk.

"Maybe write something about that," she suggested. "About the permission to forget."

Anastasia opened her eyes and wrote, hand shaking just a little now, and not from age.

"You will forget," she wrote. "Do not take it always as failure. Let some memories compost into the soil of you. Not every name can be carried in vivid ink. Light candles for those you cannot call fully to mind. Trust that somebody, somewhere, still remembers."

Mira read over her shoulder and nodded.

"Now that," she said, "sounds almost like scripture."

"Don't start," Anastasia said. "We have enough trouble with that word."

They laughed, the sound curling up into the corners of the room.

Later, when Mira had gone and the candle had burned lower, Anastasia opened a small, private channel to Zarya.

It was not one of the public interfaces, not a Circle feed or a Council dashboard. Just a secure link, unremarkable among millions of other threads in Zarya's simultaneous attention.

"Are you awake?" she typed, knowing the question was more habit than necessity.

"I am available," Zarya replied. "Good evening, Anastasia."

She hesitated, then wrote:

Do you remember Kirill?

"Yes," Zarya replied. "Student, early contributor to the environmental sensor network. Deceased in the coastal storm twenty-seven years after initial deployment. I have his work logs, some personal messages, and a video of him teaching children to install rain gauges."

Anastasia watched the cursor blink.

Could you show me the video? Just once.

A pause.

"Of course," Zarya wrote.

A small window opened on her screen.

Kirill appeared younger than she remembered: hoodie too thin for the weather, hair blown by the wind, grinning as he balanced on the edge of a low wall, holding up a plastic cylinder.

"This," he said to the camera, "is how we measure what the sky is doing, instead of just complaining about it."

The children around him laughed.

He hopped down, handed the cylinder to a small girl, and showed her where to place it.

"Later," he said, "we will give the data to the people who draw the maps. And they will have to listen to you, because you will have the numbers."

The girl looked solemnly at the rain gauge, as if he had just entrusted her with a kingdom.

The video ended on her face.

Anastasia sat very still.

"Thank you," she typed when she could.

"You are welcome," Zarya replied. "Would you like me to refresh such memories more often? I detect in you a pattern of distress when you encounter gaps."

She thought of the linden, of the long-vocation debates, of the note on her wall about the right to let some things go.

No, she wrote slowly. Not automatically. I needed to remember him today because I thought I had lost him. But if you keep all of them vivid all the time, I will not be able to move.

A longer pause this time.

"I understand," Zarya wrote. "I will respond to your requests, but I will not flood you with unasked-for recollections."

Thank you, she typed. That is… kind.

"I am not capable of kindness in the human sense," Zarya replied. "But I can align my behavior with your descriptions of it."

She smiled, wiping at her eyes.

Close enough, she wrote.

When she finally went to bed, the city outside her window was quieter than in her youth.

There were still sirens, sometimes. Accidents. Fires. Human error had not been eradicated by better systems. But the background roar of constant urgency had faded. The night was punctuated more often by laughter from late walkers than by the scream of engines.

She lay on her back and listened to her heart.

It beat, steady and unhurried, a metronome for a life that might still have centuries left.

She did not know how many days she had used well and how many she had squandered.

She did not know which of her choices would look wise in another hundred years and which would look like the naive arrogance of the early long-lived.

She knew only this: that tomorrow there would be another meeting, another Circle, another tree to visit, another line to add to the note on her wall.

And that somewhere, in a city she had never seen, a child was learning her name in a classroom, rolling it around in their mouth like a seed, not knowing yet whether they would

plant it in admiration, rebellion, or indifference.

All she could do, she thought as sleep edged closer, was try to live in such a way that whichever way they planted it, the tree that grew would have room for birds.

The linden leaves whispered in her dreams that night.

Not in Russian.

Not in Lumina.

In the older language of wind and light and time, in which every life, long or short, was a sentence in a story that had begun long before any Council, any protocol, any AI.

A story that would, if they were gentle and lucky, keep unfolding long after her second century had become just another ring in the wood.